

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1313

April 29, 2021

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Chairwoman
House Committee on Appropriations
H-307 The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations
1036 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Sanford Bishop Jr.
Chairman
House Appropriations Subcommittee
on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies
Agencies
2362-A Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jeff Fortenberry
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Subcommittee
on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration and Related
Agencies
1036 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Granger, Chairman Bishop, and Ranking Member Fortenberry:

As you consider Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 appropriations, we write to request robust funding for USDA's ReConnect Program building on the enacted \$635 million that was appropriated in FY21, and \$350 million for the rural broadband loan and grant program authorized by the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-334).

Affordable broadband access is critical for the economic development of rural communities, enabling them to fully participate in the internet-based economy. It enables farmers to use precision agriculture techniques, patients to access medical care remotely via telemedicine, children to conduct research for school projects, and businesses to engage with customers. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing digital disparities, leaving many unable to adequately access these increasingly necessary services.

Since the ReConnect program's launch, over \$1.3 billion has been invested in high-speed broadband infrastructure, helping to improve rural e-Connectivity for rural customers across 35 states but it is clear significant unmet needs remain. In several funding cycles, USDA has reported an approximate three to one ratio in funding sought to funding available. Strong demand for this program exists, and robust funding in FY22 will serve to fill these gaps.

The COVID-19 pandemic has proved that high-quality broadband access that can keep pace with advances in technology and increased demand for services, such as video conferencing, is critical. While USDA has helped to expand broadband access for severely unserved areas, many communities still lack internet service that meets the FCC's minimum speed standard for broadband – 25 megabits per second for downloads and 3 megabits per second for uploads as established by the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-334), the Farm Bill. It is estimated that 22% of Americans in rural areas lack access to these fixed terrestrial speeds, compared to only 1.5% of Americans in urban areas.

Therefore, we respectfully request the Committee include language urging the Rural Utility Service (RUS) to, along with continuing to provide funding for unserved areas, expand ReConnect eligibility to provide funding to areas without access to internet speeds that meet or exceeds the 25/3 Mbps standard consistent with the 2018 Farm Bill. These programs must promote broad participation, technological

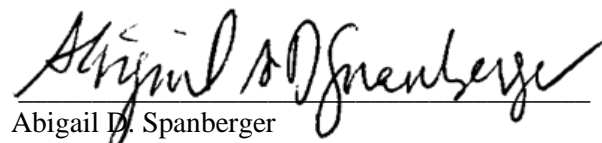
neutrality, and transparency, to ultimately improve service, connect communities, and enhance accountability for the funding. Further, we request that the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) at USDA be directed to expeditiously disburse such funds once grants and loans are awarded. Currently, the difficulties of operating in a pandemic can make the administration of broadband projects more difficult due to disruptions in workforce and supply chains.

The Farm Bill Broadband Program was substantially reworked in the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 to provide grant funding for applicants, direct dollars to high-need communities, improve the long-term viability of projects, and promote the accountability of applicants. The authorization level was increased to \$350,000,000, to match the Committee's focus on bolstering rural broadband infrastructure.

In light of funding in previous fiscal years, we respectfully request robust funding for USDA's rural broadband loan and grant programs. Investing in these programs and providing direction that will expand eligibility to areas that still lack basic broadband service, will provide a meaningful down-payment in our rural communities and their economies at a time when it's most needed. As our economy recovers from the pandemic, we believe that continued support for these programs is critical to address the "digital divide" and ensure that our rural communities have equal access to opportunity.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,


Abigail D. Spanberger
Member of Congress


Rodney Davis
Member of Congress

/S/_____
David Scott
Member of Congress

/S/_____
Kim Schrier, M.D.
Member of Congress

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Alma S. Adams, Ph.D.
Member of Congress

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Doug LaMalfa
Member of Congress

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Jim Costa
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Jim Hagedorn
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James P. McGovern
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Jimmy Panetta
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James R. Baird
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Ann McLane Kuster
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Cindy Axne
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Ro Khanna
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Bobby L. Rush
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Angie Craig
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Chris Jacobs
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Bob Gibbs
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August Pfluger
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Brian Fitzpatrick
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David B. McKinley, P.E.
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Ted Budd
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Grace F. Napolitano
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Earl L. "Buddy" Carter
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Bill Huizenga
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Albio Sires
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Fred Keller
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Mike Kelly
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Lizzie Fletcher
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